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AUTHOR Shelton, Jack
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ABSTRACT

The PACERS Small Schools Cooperative is an association of 29 small public schools in 25 communities in rural Alabama whose goal is to keep schools open by making visible their viability. To that end, the schools of the cooperative develop appropriate curricular and extracurricular opportunities for schools and students that involve the people in the community; they develop these curricula "in house" using their own teachers and their own interactive technology; they promote active learning in the schools, and by extension create active communities; and they generate information and research. They have made connections between schools and communities in order to forge long-term partnerships that produce public outcomes. Active learning, place-based learning, public outcomes, and "consequential learning" have enabled young people to know that they can make a difference and be recognized in their communities as people who make a difference. Cooperative achievements include finding a lot of partners and funders, starting over 50 school-based enterprises through the "Alabama Real" program, and being invited and funded by the Alabama Legislature to implement all of Alabama's mandated courses online as well as develop remediation courses. The PACERS experience shows what happens when people come together to build upon their own strengths, use their own resources, make their work public, and intend to change the way things are. (TD)

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Better Rural Schools Building Better Rural Communities

Jack Shelton, USA

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Better Rural Schools Building Better Rural Communities

Jack Shelton, USA

I want to say thanks to Jim and Mike and also to the staff that has been so kind and generous to us throughout the week. I want to warn Mike and Jim that I am going to try to hire away most of them.

The great American philosopher is named Lawrence Peter Barra, known to people in the United States as Yogi. He was a baseball player given to malapropos and oxi morons and non-sensical statements that bear great truth. Yogi was to speak at a meeting and he was late, and he was later and he didn't make the meeting and word got out to the press that he was lost and when he finally arrived he was interrogated by the press who asked him, "if he was lost?" He said, "Yes, I was lost but I was making very good time."

It's because of that kind of thing that my telephone rings. Educational policy and practice in my state has for a long time had a very lost quality about it but we have been making very good time. My phone rings because people are interested in keeping their schools open and my phone rings when schools get closed. I am the person in Alabama who gets the call, "can you help?" and usually the answer is "No, I can not help." Our schools have been routinely closed and school closure is something that has reverberated through this conference. I am going to tell you a small story about an attempt on the part of people in Alabama to resist school closure and to build upon the strengths of schools of small rural public schools so that they might be more appropriate for their students and more appropriate for their communities.

The story is about a group of schools that have joined together and called themselves the "PACERS Cooperative". It is a voluntary association of twenty-nine small rural public schools that are ethnically and geographically and economically representative of rural Alabama. It is not a caucus, I want to be very clear about that, it is not a caucus. A cooperative is much more difficult than a caucus. A caucus brings together people who already know their common interest and already know how to talk with each other and already have their values in line and already agree with one another. When you bring together, at least in Alabama, black people and white people and Spanish speaking people and Native American people, people of different economic backgrounds and ask them to work together it is much more complex and difficult than a caucus. And our hardest work and our most important work has been to cooperate with each other. It is a very important thing for me to say

that I can not understand any way that rural communities and schools in my state can survive alone and independently and major energy must be devoted to their collaboration and their coalition. The tendency it seems among rural people is to withdraw into isolation, to be satisfied with their accomplishments and to forget the much harder and more profitable work of working together. So we are a voluntary association of all sorts of people.

Our definition by goals is fairly simple. We wanted to keep schools open by making visible their viability. Now that's a very important thing for us, making visible their viability. Not writing about it simply or necessarily, not talking about it, not talking to policy makers but making the schools visible and making at the same time their viability visible. This was our fundamental task.

People had to be able to see small rural public schools because they were no longer seen and therefore could not be understood. This goal of keeping schools open by demonstrating their viability, making their viability visible in part by building upon their strengths was fuelled by four objectives. We wanted to develop appropriate curricular and extra curricular opportunities for schools, students, and that involved people in the community. We knew there was value in cost effective technology but by god we wanted to own the technology. We did not want a centre pivot irrigation technology where some university was piping stuff out to us. We wanted to build the curriculum and we wanted to use interactive technology through which our own teachers could design courses and could teach. We did not want to cultivate any further the dependency on some extra community or extra school organization. I say that with a lot of energy and with a lot of overstatement but none the less it has proved to be a very effective way for us to go forward. Another thing that we wanted to do was to move from passive to active. Schools are so dreadfully passive now that it is a deplorable quality and characteristics of schools. Please come in, please sit down, please shut up, please fold back the top of your head, we will pour something in your head, sometime later in your life we will find out how much you can pour back out through your mouth, nose or hands. Rural schools are emulated by rural communities which often become passive especially in the drive to collaborate and cooperate with others. And the fourth thing was we wanted to generate information and research.

Now we believe that our cooperation and our goals and objectives would gather partners. How did we go about this? I'm going to tell you quickly a story about my father. In 1947 he and I were sitting in a restaurant in Birmingham Alabama. Birmingham is the largest city and my father's leg was shot off in the "Battle of the Bulge" and he paid a terrific price for that. He never lived a pain free day in his life after that and he had to make a powerfully conscious decision to survive. He laid in a VA hospital for six months and would not eat, was forced to eat and he almost died. The reason he survived was an orderly found out that he was a good swimmer and came and picked him up, he was a huge man, but he was under 100 pounds. The orderly picked him up and threw him in a swimming pool and said, "sink or swim" and walked out and he swam. We were sitting in the restaurant and that's the background that you need to understand the story because a very kind southern woman recognizing immediately that he had been in the second world war came by and put her arm around his shoulders and said to him, "I'm so sorry you lost your leg." He said to her, to my great shock, "hell lady I didn't lose it, I know right where it is!" His point was "deal with what's in front of you lady, deal with what's there." That is an attitude and disposition that we have taken in our work. It's not what we don't have that marks our communities and our schools in the first order, it's what we have. It's what's there. It's not what we can necessarily get from some other place. We set out not to be pathological. This is not to dismiss needs and problems and I can tell you about needs and problems and I can tell you stories that would break your heart. But the starting ground for us was that we were not "no place". We were not the sticks, we were not the happy hunting grounds for missionaries and mercenaries. In our work we focused upon our schools and communities as effective institutions despite woeful funding, missing support, and abusive policies.

We also said we are going to make connections and these are the connections that we sought and sought to make between schools and communities trying to make boundaries so fluid that it is hard to tell when you are in one and when you are in the other. The second is to make connections between learning in place and the third is to make connections between schools and communities in one community with another community. Schools of one race with schools of another race. Integrated schools with non-integrated schools and so forth, but making connections was fundamental to us. Then we had to identify the coordinates and set our agenda. One thing we wanted to do was create long term partnerships that would produce public outcomes. We also had to determine if there was a compelling interest that would bring us together and sustain us and we had to create our agendas. We had to create our action agendas. So fostering our collaboration, trying to figure out what the public outcomes were that we needed and setting the agenda for schools was a starting place which involved all our

schools, all our communities, young people, teachers, across the state. Excuse the language I'm about to use but in the three and a half months of organizing this cooperative which I call a hemorrhoidal occupation because I burned up \$17,000 dollars worth of gasoline money in three and a half months. So it was a matter of getting out and getting with the people.

Now we got all that done and we had to start coming to terms with what is the language that we are using and there are four terms that I have in bold here but I guess they got in bold over time but there are many words that could substitute. One thing was we wanted all our programs, everything to be active, that is kids, student centered learners, students responsible for their own learning, students making decisions and we have been very much informed in that by a long term conversation with Real Enterprises which Jonathan was the brains behind and Foxfire which has been a very close working partner of ours for some time. So, active learning.

The second was contextualized or place learning. It has been talked about communities as living labs but I want to talk about what has happened in a lot of our schools which is we have changed the nature of the space inside the schools or on the school grounds. So that we have bog ponds, passive solar green houses, aquaponics unit, photography labs, publishing labs, presses, any number of things that are now spaces and equipment, industry standard tools that are inside schools or built adjacent to schools which in a way attempt to bring inside the school the learning spaces that young people really need.

The third thing is no money goes to anything that does not produce a public outcome and to say this really quickly. Our schools are frozen from January to April because all the schools in our cooperative are majority poverty schools. Some of them are ninety-five percent free and reduced lunch and schools of that sort do not do well on standardized testing and the state imposes tremendous sanctions upon schools. No money but tremendous sanctions upon schools that don't do well. There are a lot of ways to fight that. One way is to try and get the policy changed but something that we have been out after is that schools should do things that people in the communities can use their own unmediated judgment to determine the value of it. It's too much the case in the United States that somebody at Stanford or Princeton tells somebody in Oakman Alabama whether their school is worth a dam and nobody in Stanford or Princeton knows where Oakman is. The people at Oakman know what they want and they know what their value is but sometimes they can't get at it because their schools do not produce tangible outcomes that they can measure. Those are three, Active, Placed, Public Outcomes that invite unmediated judgment and the fourth is a term we have trademarked. You can use it. It's a term we trademarked because all the terms that I have

heard did not capture what we were doing, and the term that we have used is "consequential learning". That is asking ourselves the question, "Does the learning that goes on here, make a difference and to whom does it make a difference?" So we have students who have become defacto publishers of newspapers for their communities, historians for their communities, scientists for their communities, artists for their communities, home builders for their communities, and so on and so on. So that young people are immediately known in their communities as people who make a difference to the quality of life of that place. The second is that when young people know that it is consequential for them because they learn that they can make a difference in those places. I think that one of the reasons for ruralite migration is that young people have never come, had the opportunities to understand what a difference they can make in reshaping the vary places where they live. There are many things I could go on about what makes learning consequential but the third thing is that it is very important to young people to be known as people who can make a difference. Young people tell me that all the time.

Those were our ideas and we got together and so what are the outcomes. Well, one that I am going over real quickly is, we found a lot of partners and we found an awful lot of funders. The partners include going in Jonathan's directions, include A+, which is the most effectual school reform advocacy group in Alabama. Children's Voices, which is the children's advocacy group. Alabama Rise, which is a poverty policy organization, The Alabama Poverty Project, The Alabama Children's Commissioner's Office, and so forth. There is not an effectual advocacy group in the state that we have not been invited to link with. We didn't set out to do that but when they saw our work they invited us in or when we saw the necessity of them being engaged in our work we went to them. Our partners now include schools and school systems and many communities, the office of the governor and if you knew this history you would laugh. We actually get a lot of money from the Alabama State Department of Education. Ten years ago when I walked into the State Department of Educations building all the doors were bolted. Now they are open. So we came away with partners, with a variety of funders: Lyndhurst, Aninburg, Ford, US Department of Agriculture, The Appalachian Regional Commission, The Alabama Development Office, The Arts and Humanities Council State and National, The Alabama Legislature, The State Department of Education, and a lot of local businesses. There were results to our work. Now, there are three formats that came out of our work that I want to mention to you.

The first of them, I brought some kids along with me and they are going to be up here on the screen and the first outcome is a program called "Better Schools Building

Better Communities" and there are some students on tape who are going to talk to you now about that.

The PACERS Small Schools Cooperative is an Association of twenty-nine small public schools in twenty five communities in rural Alabama. The schools of PACERS Cooperative work together to develop and implement academic programs that capitalize on the advantages of small school size. PACERS schools have designed a variety of projects through which students do academic work with real consequences in their communities. Through this work students are engaged in the study, service and celebration of their communities.

Student 1:

What is an education?

Education is learning, teaching, and experience, is courteous and not criticizing others. Education is being inventive, not destructive.

Student 2:

It's caring and being helpful to your society. It's being able to listen and comprehend attentively. Education is having knowledge to distinguish the uses of certain books. It's making friends, not enemies. Education is what we learn through school, people, books and experiences.

Student 3:

It's the ability to communicate freely with others. Education gives us the skills that goes best with what we choose to achieve in life. It gives a perception of what is right and wrong.

Student 4:

Education is being able to enjoy life's offers. It's being able to succeed in life without hurting others. Education is respecting other people's opinions. It is having the right amount of confidence in yourself.

Student 5:

Education is being able to forgive and to share with generosity - Sophia Duke's, tenth grade.

Student 6:

There was always this thing, I know I often heard in high school, elementary school, on up a lot of students heard this before as well, to where people say that you can achieve anything you want to. The thing is with that, at the time I knew I could achieve anything I wanted to, but I didn't understand I could achieve anything I wanted to.

Student 7:

Really, I didn't care a lot about school. I mean I knew I had to get up and go everyday and I had to make it until I graduated but probably if would have been my choice, if my parents hadn't made me stay in school I would have

been fine dropping out when I was sixteen and going and getting my GED.

Student 8:

When I was little I always knew I was going to college. It was a given in my family, after high school you go to college. But I really didn't have a direction, I didn't know what I wanted to do when I got to college.

Student 9:

I was losing interest in high school, you know when I first went to high school. I was a pretty decent student up to the sixth grade. I was you know "A" and "B" honor role, pretty good kid but in the seventh grade I started going down hill and in the eighth grade it was just getting worse, starting going down hill. I didn't have much interest in school, didn't want to do homework and just kind of passing by.

Student 10

I can honestly say in ninth grade I was acting like a complete and total fool. Which at any high school I would have done the same. You were in that transition period, especially with the system of education we had to where if you weren't the top in the class you weren't the one that was recognized.

Student 11:

High School classrooms are notorious for 8½ by 11 sheets of paper that are designed by folks with good intentions but were not knowledgeable of the community that these worksheets are going to because it doesn't have any real application for that student. Pressure comes along and says that ain't cutting it. Pressure says, "you got to take what you learn in the classroom, you got to realize what your going to learn in school is going to take you for the rest of your life." You've got to say "okay, what I'm learning in the classroom is how I'm going to apply. I'm going to apply my English to work on the newspaper. I'm going to apply my science to growing the fish. I'm going to take my math and I'm going to apply it to working on house construction."

Student 12:

School to me changed a little bit you know. The interest in getting up in the morning and going to school changed. I knew what I was going to do 8:00 the bell rang I'd be in the class. But I knew in the evening after the PACERS project did come to our school that I would be working on the newspaper project. That I would be fooling around with the computer coming up with a new design. My feelings of school changed because it was a little bit more interesting for me as well as the students. We all knew that seventh period was coming we better work on the newspaper project, you know we had to do a story, we had to do an article, we had to interview somebody. Where as before seventh period was coming we was going to be in a

class with a book. Everybody nodding off going to sleep maybe.

Student 13:

Working in the PACERS Cooperative helped me learn a lot about myself. A lot of ways I learn better, the things that I like to do, the things that I'm able to do.

Student 14:

Through the PACERS way of learning through doing, you know hands on, you are learning but yet you are giving back to your community and you're applying something that you've learned in the project to some aspect that goes out in to the community and also to your future. It gives you a chance to show what you have learned in the project to your family, to people outside, to your community, and to people abroad and it gives you some feeling of recognition. To prove that you have done something rather than taking home your letter grade and say here mom I made an "A". Here mom I laid out this newspaper. Here mom I'm the editor, this is my article. It gives you a little bit more.

Student 15:

I think if every clients had a public outcome, I think to start with it would be a lot more fun, it would be more enjoyable. In band and stuff when we get public complements and stuff like that it encourages us to do more because no body has every complimented us on what we did in science, or English or history, stuff like that but they have complimented us on our drama, on our band and when we really start being honest that is the stuff we enjoy. Is the stuff that we see other people enjoying and I think we saw the community enjoying what happened in history class and science class and English class. I think that would encourage us to do more and to have more fun with it and as a result of that learn more.

Student 16:

Getting something out of learning is what I mainly go for when I go into a class. I tell myself maybe the first of the semester, the new nine weeks, well I'm going to make something of it, I'm going to be interested in it. But in a lot of cases it's just hard to keep your attention focused on that when your constantly day after day doing routine paper work. And that's another thing I really like about the PACERS Real Program is that you know you are all working together and your not just sitting around a table or at a desk, you're actually getting out making phone calls, doing computer work you know it's kind of like a real job. It's like your really getting out there and doing something.

Student 17:

There is so much competition in the classroom. Who's going to be valedictorian, who's going to be salutatorian, who has the highest GPA. It's really great to know that

you don't have to compete against each other all the time. You can come together to make something work.

Student 18:

When we go out to a bid to decide if we do a job and you want 20 2 x 4's cut to six feet you know. You are suppose to cut them exactly six feet, if you was in a classroom and I wrote that down on a test and it wasn't right and then maybe it would be a few points but I could still pass the test but out in the field you are actually doing work that's money and time and materials you know and that would be frustrating and the more I started caring about the work I was doing physically through the greenhouse project through PACERS then the more I started caring about my school work and it improved my grades, my attitudes and a lot of my teachers told me that. That was some of the best things that every happened to me.

Student 19:

That's what I really did enjoy about the photography and I think it was one reason it was so easy for me to like it because you actually get in there and do it and it was easier for me to learn that way and it was like yeh, I had finally found something that I can do. It gave me a sense of self worth, finally.

Student 20

Education through PACERS is something concrete. Each project produces a product, that's something that the student's see. It's something they can hold. Rather than saying okay I made an "A" that's it. Where on the newspaper project or any other project in PACERS, there is a product that is professional, you know, something you can hold, something that everybody else sees. Like for me now I work for the Birmingham Times, which is something that I got from the knowledge that I learned by working through PACERS and learning through doing. I mean right now I have papers in a truck and that's something concrete. There is like the stores, they have a business, there is the Red Letter Print Company, they print business cards and many things and as well as the Book Writer, or the Day Care, other projects like that. They have something that they can go out and show people, something they can touch, something that they feel is important to them and that's their education. They can tell you like through the solar house project, if you take one of those students that done that project, that was there from beginning to end and they built something that was concrete that they can touch. They can tell you nail for nail what they have done and yet do it again. That's PACERS learning, that's their education.

I want to mention two other outcomes of our work. The Better School's Program, there are a lot of hand outs on one of the tables back here that describes the projects and how to do them and how to get in touch with people about them but there are two others things that I want to talk

about quickly. One is that a format that came out of our work is we call "Alabama Real" and in that project we have started more than fifty now School Based Enterprises. We are using the curriculum from Real Enterprises and the Teacher Training in schools K through 14. We have started re-building institutions, especially related to money. We have started school community education foundations as a catchment for money and for gathering in resources from rural people who are and what I call the diasporum and we are also starting school based and community based enterprises. School based and community based Credit Unions as ways to keep capital in communities and as a way to begin thrift and investment education with kids. We also have become, in the states there are what are called school to career programs, we have been invited to be a state wide school to career program in Alabama which means we are in a position to help rural kids throughout the state in a variety of ways that relate their education to their careers.

One other outcome which is an overwhelming outcome for us is that our program has been invited to create what the Governor of the State is calling the Alabama On-Line High School. The legislature gave us about a million dollars this year and the State Department of Education is putting in another half million or so, maybe more than that. In the upcoming year in order for us in order to implement on-line, all the courses that are mandated by the Alabama State Education Accountable Act, that's twenty-nine courses. What it will mean in affect is that every school in Alabama can get every course required and that is a very important thing for the time that I have worked many schools get closed under the rational that they can not provide the courses and very shortly now that will not be an issue in the state of Alabama because all the kids will be able to get courses and we have hired twenty five Alabama teachers to design the courses and we are hiring the teachers to teach the courses. So it will be courses designed by Alabama teachers, using Alabama standards for Alabama students. At the same time the State Department of Education has put additional money into our work for remediation courses. Our state is under terrible duress about high school graduation exams and we have many, many kids who flunked the high school examination, graduation examination. We have the most difficult graduation examination in the United States. We also with the exception of one state put less money into children's education than any state. So we have imposed upon our young people the absolute highest standards in the United States and we have given them the absolute lowest amount of resources. The State Superintendent of Education called me and he said in affect, "I don't know any way out of the box unless PACERS will help us." And so we have been asked to use our approaches to design remediation units and remediation courses and to hire teachers who are not necessarily rural teachers but to design adaptive courses and remediation and preparation

units so that our kids have a more equitable chance of getting out of high school. We didn't think all of this was going to happen when we got started. We just trusted that the way we were going about things was right and that if our kids could shine so to speak, if they could do what was in them to do and if it was public and if we did a good job of presenting it to people who make policy and help to

form practise we could make a difference in the state. Now it's a small story, it's a small state, it's a small group of folks but I like to think it's a pretty good parable of what happens when people come together to build upon their own strengths, to use their own resources, intend to make their work public and intend to change the way things are. Thank you.